

ADVENTURES IN THE DESERT

CHERYL RAO

Illustrations

Ashish Sengupta



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Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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A LET DOWN

It was lucky that Shweta and Samir did not know what was in store for them when they had set out for Suratgarh. The journey by train from their home in Mumbai had taken all of two days.

Enroute at Delhi, they were met by a friend of their father, who put them on another train for Ganganagar.

"Don't any trains go directly to Suratgarh?" asked Samir. "Are you sure you saw this place on the map Sweaty?"

"It may have fallen out of the atlas during the past month," his sister replied, annoyed that he reminded her of her confusing Suratgarh in Rajasthan with that of Surat in Gujarat.

Their mother Rekha Puri smiled and said nothing. She was tired and lay back on her bunk. It had been an ordeal packing up and arranging for the security of their flat for a full year. She had last joined her husband for a long spell when the twins had been born; otherwise she had held onto her career in a bank all through the years, while Jaideep Puri's job in the army took him from one small cantonment to another.

The twins had just crossed their twelfth birthday. Shweta was tall for her age and often claimed to be a teenager. When she did, Samir made it a point to mock her and tell his friends, "Yeah, she's older than

I am. But she's dumb, you know. That's why we're both in the same class."

He was shorter than his sister and his lack of inches drove him crazy. All day, he jumped to reach the ceiling fan, or the archway of the entrance to school or the blackboard in the class room. He was desperate to grow and feared that he'd forever be doomed to looking up into his sister's eyes. His twin sister at that! Already Shweta had lost her baby fat and looked and behaved like a young lady, with her single ponytail and measured way of speaking. Samir on the other hand, was still a baby. No puppy fat on him, but his movements were so awkward that he always gave the impression of being untidy.

Rekha Puri was relieved that Samir and Shweta had accepted the idea of a one year break graciously. Of late, she had found that their arguments were getting a bit too much for her to manage. They needed their father's company in addition to hers. Yes, they could do with a year in a small town, away from the temptations of the city market and the latest in clothes, books, fast food, videos and games.

It was mid-morning when they got off the train at Ganganagar. As they stepped out of the coach, a strong blast of heat struck them in their faces. "Oh - oh!" murmured Shweta. But she forgot the sudden discomfort as soon as she saw her father's arms around her.

The excitement of collecting their luggage and getting into the van was soon over and they were on their last leg of the journey. Shweta and Samir opened the windows at the back and the breeze made them feel quite comfortable. Then, before they knew what was happening, they were inside a whirlpool of dust.

"Sandstorm," said Pa, matter-of-factly, slowing

down slightly as he drove along the straight, narrow road.

Crunch crunch, went Samir's teeth.

Shweta ran her hands over her face. There was a grainy quality to her skin that had not been there a moment ago.

"Sand!" the twins exclaimed together in disgust.

"Well, what else did you expect in the desert? Sea gulls?"

"Oh Pa!" groaned Shweta, not finding her father's brand of humour very funny.

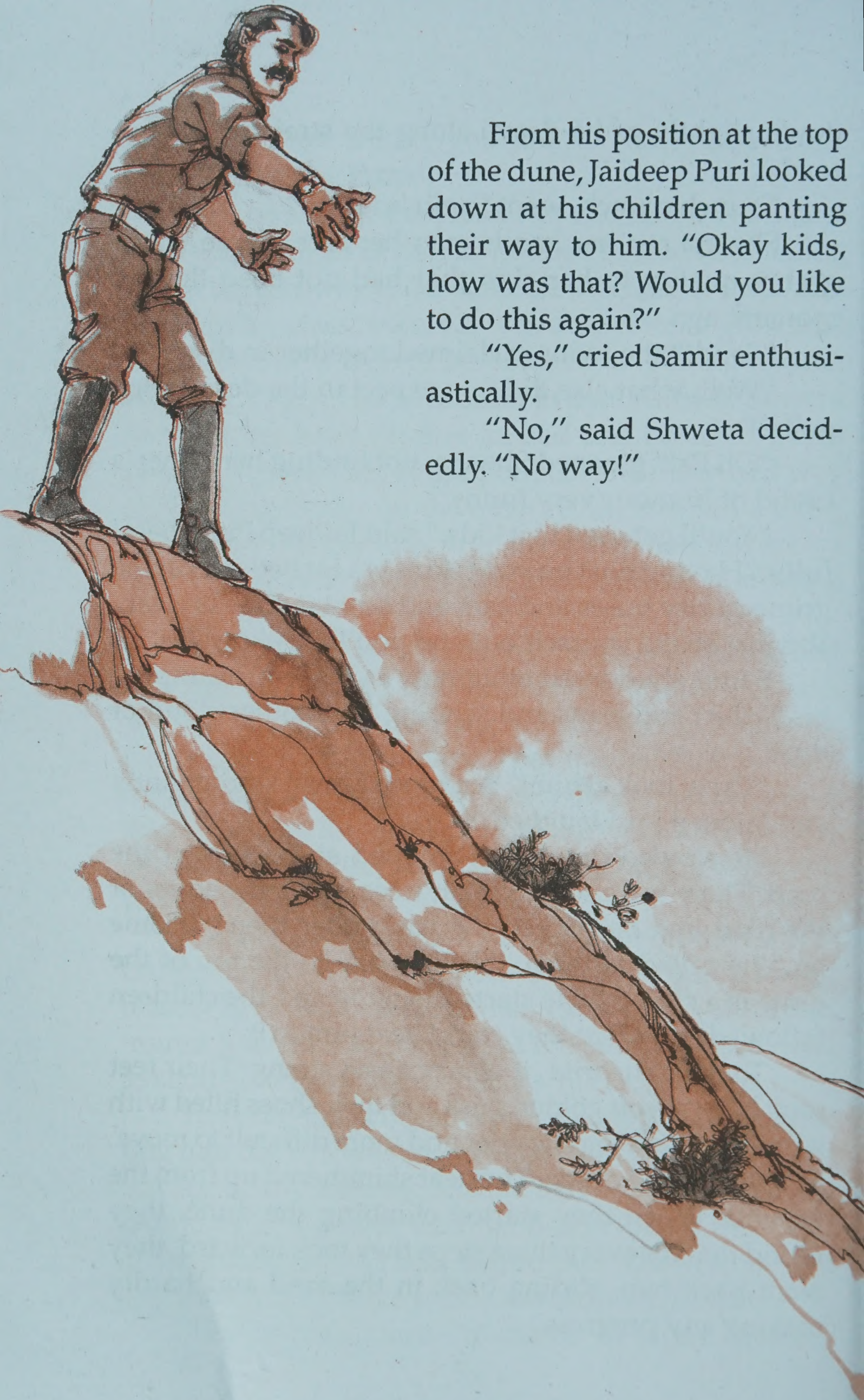
"You'll get used to it kids," said Jaideep Puri cheerfully. "Having dust on your skins is a lot better than the grime of city buses and cars and scooter. This is clean. You just shake yourself out and you'll be okay."

Samir shuddered obligingly in his seat, thumping his T-shirt and jeans and sending up another cloud of dust.

"Papa, look at him!" Screamed Shweta indignantly and Jaideep Puri laughed.

He slowed down and stopped at the side of the road. There were some keekar trees along the edges of the road and he parked the van under them. "Come on," he called to them, "the last one to the top of the dune is a chimp!" He started jogging and the children followed, sure that they could beat him to it.

To their surprise, it was not easy going. Their feet sank into the soft golden sand and their shoes filled with it, making their legs heavier and more difficult to move. The sun blazed down. The heat shimmered up from the ground. When they started climbing the dune, they found that for every three steps they took forward, they went back two, sliding back in the sand and hardly making any progress.



From his position at the top of the dune, Jaideep Puri looked down at his children panting their way to him. "Okay kids, how was that? Would you like to do this again?"

"Yes," cried Samir enthusiastically.

"No," said Shweta decidedly. "No way!"

They trudged back to the van and their father reached into the icebox he'd brought with him and handed them a bottle of cold water.

"Wow!" exclaimed Shweta, drinking deeply. "This tastes better than Seven Up or Coke."

"The joys of simple living" said their father, winking at his wife, and starting up the engine again.

"We're almost home," he announced as they neared a line of small shops. Samir looked out. "Pa," he said longingly, "Do you think we could stop at an ice-cream parlour?"

Jaideep Puri burst out laughing. "There's no ice-cream parlour here!"

"No ice-creams, no Softy machines?" asked Samir in a shocked voice. "What about cold drinks?"

"Oh, you'll get those," his father assured him. "But you'll have to cool them in your own fridge when the electricity is on."



There was a stunned silence in the back seat. No ice-creams. Cold drinks at home only - which meant that Ma could keep a watch on their consumption. Dust everywhere. A kind of heat that made Bombay in its worst pre-monsoon days seem positively cool. No shade. A tiny Colony with a handful of flats. An air of sleepiness that was so different from the hustle and bustle they had known in Bombay.

Where had they landed themselves?

MAKING ENEMIES

The sinking feeling the twins had experienced on that first day did not leave them. Suratgarh had all the wide open spaces their father had promised them but the heat was so great that they could not go outdoors until 6.30 in the evening. They were confined to the house, to the single room with the cooler and within no time at all, they were squabbling and getting on each other's nerves.

By the time school started in the first week of July, they were actually looking forward to studying. But there again, they were in for a rude surprise. The term had started in April and they had missed a great deal of work. They had to catch up with their lessons and appear for their unit tests in that first month, leaving them with no time to enjoy the curriculum or have fun and games.

The children in their classes were not over-friendly, and the twins did not realise that they were so different in their manner and way of speaking that it set them apart from the rest of the students. Here everyone spoke Hindi all the time. Until now, their use of the language was confined to the Hindi class and so they found it difficult to understand what was going on. During the recess, they could not join the games because the instructions flew back and forth in a totally different brand of Hindi from theirs. When they tried to put in their bit, they drew laughs, and the two of them huddled together all day—something they had never done in their old school.

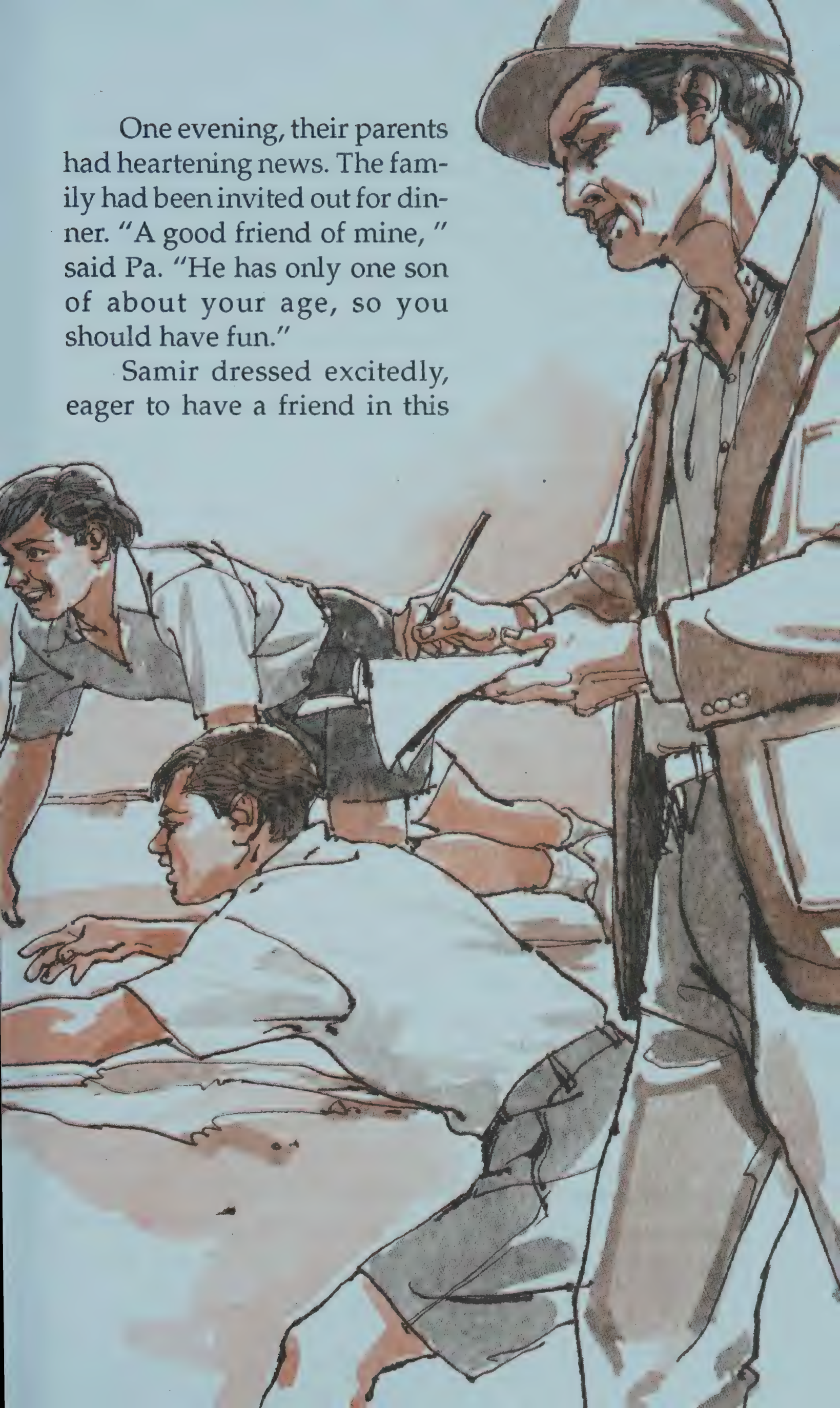
And then there was the bully - Arjun. Somehow he had got it into his head that Samir was a sissy because he hung about with his sister. He passed remarks all the time. Twice he spilt ink on Samir's books and once, while playing kho-kho, he brought Shweta down with a flying tackle. She was bruised and scraped but she did not complain because the Games Instructor had not seen what had happened and she knew that none of her class fellows would squeal on Arjun.

Later, when Samir wanted to fight Arjun, he just lined up his friends behind him and said, "Come on. Come on outside." Samir could not win! The future was bleak!



One evening, their parents had heartening news. The family had been invited out for dinner. "A good friend of mine," said Pa. "He has only one son of about your age, so you should have fun."

Samir dressed excitedly, eager to have a friend in this



lonely place. Shweta made a face. "So you get a boy of your age to talk to. What do I get?" She threw on a pair of jeans and a checked shirt identical to the one Samir was wearing and announced that she was not ready. They waited for their father to start the van and blow the horn for them, but he didn't.

"Walking distance kids," he said. "It's just there on that parallel road."

The four of them walked a short distance in the Colony and entered a block of flats. As they climbed to the first floor, Papa commented, "Both the Mehtas are doctors in the Army. They have got a posting together after quite some time."

At the sound of surname 'Mehta' Samir felt a twinge of unease. Mehta? Wasn't that lout of an Arjun also a Mehta? Could Papa be taking them to that creep's house? The twins looked at each other but said nothing. They had no chance to speak anyway because the doorbell was answered, a lot of 'Hellos' and 'How are You's' were exchanged and then introductions were being made.

"Your twins!" exclaimed Mrs Mehta. "I've heard so much about them from Jaideep. Have they joined school?"

"Yes," replied Rekha. "They're in Class 8."

Samir knew, just knew, what was coming next. Mrs Mehta raised her voice and called out, "Arjun! Come here son! Here are some school mates of yours."

Shweta raised her eyes to the ceiling while no one was looking. Samir fidgeted with his belt, not daring to look his sister for fear that they would both groan aloud.

Arjun came into the room. He stood quietly near his mother as she introduced him to the twins. "They're in my class," he said, in a voice Samir and Shweta found difficult to recognise. How meek he sounded! How

gentle. His whole manner was shy and lacking in confidence. Where was the Arjun of school hours?

"Take them to your room son," his father said, and obediently, Arjun turned and went back inside. He had not said anything to them—so they looked at each other, shrugged, and followed, "Give us a break!" whispered Samir to no one in particular.

They entered a brightly lit bedroom, so full of colour that both of them stopped in amazement. "What a gorgeous room!" exclaimed Shweta involuntarily. The curtains were in four different colours, the walls were covered with WWF posters and there were shelves and shelves of toys. Samir gazed at them open-mouthed. He wanted to touch them but he did not want to ask Arjun's permission.

Seeing the expression on his face, Arjun said, "A good collection, isn't it? My parents buy me whatever I ask for."

"Lucky you!" said Shweta, trying her best to put some warmth into her voice. "So, which is your favourite toy?"

"Oh, toys are for kids!" scoffed Arjun. "I'd rather be outside cycling. I have a racing bike you know. With gears... And a water bottle. And a fancy horn."

Without realising it, Arjun had hit on the one thing the twins could not do. They have never cycled. Their father had planned to get them cycles of their own, but somehow, with settling down in the new place and being confined for long hours indoors, the cycles had been forgotten.

Now they listened to Arjun ramble on and thought, "Show off!"

They waited for the evening to end. Suratgarh was just not a lucky place for them!

.... AND FRIENDS

A fortnight later, the twins came home from school and found the house filled with the smell of baking. Rekha Puri explained, "Shobhana Mehta isn't well. She's got pneumonia of all things and is admitted to the hospital. And it is your friend Arjun's birthday today, so I decided to get him here to celebrate."

"Oh Ma, why didn't you ask us?" gasped Shweta.

"Why? Have you made some other plans for today without asking me?"

"We have no plans Ma. But Arjun is the last person whose birthday we'd want to celebrate in our house! That boy's a bully and a creep!"

"Shweta!" cried her mother in astonishment. "I'm amazed at you! You've just met the boy a couple of times. How can you think so badly of him?"

Samir cut in. "A couple of times?" he snorted. "We meet that fellow every day in school. And he makes sure that we make no friends as long as he's around. Why do you have to go being nice to him?"

"Oh son," said Rekha sadly. "I didn't know that you were having problems making friends in school. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You can't change that Ma," mumbled Samir.

"But you can change today's plans," said Shweta. "I can't stand and smile and sing 'Happy Birthday' to a boy who takes every opportunity to tear my note

books or lose my pen."

Their mother stared at them. Judging from her one meeting with Arjun and her many conversations with his mother over the course of the weeks, she would never have thought he'd go to such lengths to trouble her children. Why was he doing it? She sat back. "Now kids, why don't you try forgetting what's happened upto now? You both can make the first move today. Then you can see whether there's any change in his attitude. If there isn't, you don't have to be nice again."

The twins gobbled up their meal without replying, and left the table as soon as they could, murmuring something about homework to justify their departure. They shut the door of their room and let vent to their motions. Shweta stamped her foot and said "Creep. Creep. Creep."

Samir picked up his football and bounced it as hard as he could on the floor.

There was a shout from the dining room. "That doesn't sound like homework to me," and quickly, he put it away and sat on the bed with his head in his hands.

Before they knew it, the evening was upon them and their mother went to fetch Arjun to their house. Luckily, she did not ask the twins to accompany her, and they stood on either side of the dining table and waited. The cake was already on the table, so were the sandwiches and jilebis. Samir popped one into his mouth. Well, if nothing else, Arjun's birthday had assured them of a treat. He knew that there was ice-cream in the freezer and Ma was planning to fry some samosas when she got back. He would eat—and may be with all that food in his stomach, he would find the heart to wish Arjun a happy birthday sincerely.

The door opened and Arjun came in. He looked at



the children first and then at the table. There was a dazed expression on his face.

“Happy Birthday,” chorused Shweta and Samir dutifully and handed Arjun the gift their mother had wrapped.

Mrs Puri bustled about. “Arjun, you’ll have to wait until your parents get here to cut the cake. So why don’t



the three of you go out and play French cricket or something?"

The children filed out obediently. They tossed for turns and it was Shweta's to bat first. "You bowl," said Arjun, when Samir offered him the ball. The two boys ran about the lawn, bowling and retrieving and trying their best to get Shweta out. In the process, something happened between them. It was almost as if a switch had been put on or a key had been turned. They found themselves ganging up against Shweta, and she, not to be outdone, played as she'd never played before.



When at last Samir got her out, Arjun jumped in the air, clapping him on the back and cried, "Good show pal! Now let's show her what stuff we are made of!" He took the bat and posed with style. Shweta's third ball got him out.

"Oh," groaned Samir. "Never mind Yaar. I'll sort her out."

Arjun grinned and stood on the sidelines while Shweta bowled again. "This isn't fair," she cried. "Both of you were against me, but now you're not even bothering to stop the ball for me!" As she said that, the ball hit Samir's leg and she jumped, 'Out! Out!'

Samir threw down the bat in disgust. Shweta ran to the front door. "Ma, I got both the dummies out on my own and they took ages together to make me out!" The boys looked at each other and shrugged sheepishly.

A car drew up and Arjun's parents stepped out. Mrs Mehta was looking pale but happy. "This means so much to Arjun and I could not have done it in this condition," she whispered to Rekha.

Soon the cake was cut, everyone sang, and to the surprise of the twins, they found it easy to shout good wishes and chatter naturally with Arjun. He was no longer the arch-enemy. In fact, he was good fun to be with and had plenty of wisecracks up his sleeve.

After putting away an enormous quantity of ice-cream, the children sat back with their hands on their stomachs.

"I have an idea," said Shobhana Mehta, turning to her husband. "Why don't you take the children to the sand dune after you drop me back to the hospital?"

"Yippee!" cried Arjun, jumping up. "Have you been up that huge sand dune on the way to town?" he asked Samir.

"We've been on some sand dunes. I don't know if they're the same ones you're talking of."

"They couldn't be any different," added Shweta.

"Oh, this one is special," Arjun assured her. "It's great fun going up and down. Maybe if we take some cardboard, we can slide down."

"Do that some other time son," advised his father. "Who'll go in search of cardboard now?"

Soon they were ready to leave. Arjun did not feel bad to leave his mother in the hospital, though she was there as a patient and not as a doctor. He was having fun. His birthday was turning out to be much better than he could have hoped for!

THE DUNE

The twins had been to town from the cantonment, just two or three times in the past couple of months. They had passed many dunes en-route but they had not really noticed any special one, different from the others. They were usually too busy looking at the camel carts and the local women in their colourful lehngas and the standard bright red chunni which covered most of their



faces as well as their heads. Shweta always noticed their silver jewellery too, and declared that she wanted the same kind of chunky anklets and armlets to take back with her.

Now, with Arjun, they realised that this tall dune, about fifty feet high on the side of the road, was really something. A part of it was being steadily eaten into by the brick makers whose kilns were nearby. At that very moment in fact, a camel cart was standing there, being loaded with sand.

Samir looked at it and then looked up. "How long do you think it will take for the entire sand dune to be used up?" he asked.

"Oh, never," replied Arjun. "The sand storms will keep piling up fresh stocks." He started climbing up



the sheer face of the dune and the twins followed. Rekha Puri also moved in the same direction, but her husband and Anil Mehta stopped her.

"We'd better take the easier route," they suggested, going toward a longer but more gradual slope. "We'll take just as long as we would on the 'short' climb, but it'll be a lot easier."

It was fun climbing the dune. Before the children were even half-way up, they were on their hands and knees, covered with sand, out of breath, but so happy. As soon as they reached the top, Arjun gave a whoop and came rolling down the side. Not to be outdone, the twins did the same, spitting out sand and shaking themselves at the bottom.

"That was fantastic," exclaimed Samir in delight. "Let's do it again." They started up and each tried to kick as much sand as he could on the one behind. The adults were waiting on the top of the dune. They had stretched out on the sand and were enjoying the view. "With all that water in the fields, it feels like we're at the seaside, doesn't it?" commented Rekha, to no one in particular.

"There's even a lovely breeze now," agreed Shweta, coming and plopping herself down by their side. Her father smiled at her. "So Sweaty, this isn't all that bad a place, is it? It may not be Jaipur with its palaces or Udaipur with lake, but it has a charm of its own."

Shweta fumbled about for her handkerchief and wiped the sand off her perspiring face. Then she let the breeze play on her and cool her. She started in disgust as the two boys did cartwheels on the ups and downs on the top of the dune, making themselves dirtier and dirtier. Soon they decided to gang up on Shweta.

Arjun poured a handful of sand on her hair and

said, "The best shampoo for Sweaty!" Shweta jumped to her feet and raced after him, but not before she glared at her father for letting out their horrible secret nickname for her.

"Get him Sam," she yelled, but her twin pretended not to hear and instead stuck out a leg casually and sent her sprawling. "You turncoat," Shweta spluttered, shaking her fist at her brother.

"What happened Didi?" asked Samir with a wide-eyed look. "Oh, did you trip? Are you hurt?" He jumped toward her to give her a hand up, but she shook off his help.

"You did that on purpose creep—and don't call me Didi!"

"But you are older—by all of ten minutes, " he smiled.

Shweta wanted to slap him! Since coming to Suratgarh the two of them had grown close — bound by their shared dislike of the place. They hadn't had a serious fight in three whole months—and now look at the brat! Just because he had that Arjun to gang up with, he was turning on her! She'd show the two of them. She went back to where the adults sat and planned in her mind all that she would do to get her own back.

It was late and all of them were exhausted when they reached home. Shweta had ignored the boys on the way back and they hadn't even noticed. They were too busy exchanging notes on the wrestling bouts they'd watched on TV, arguing about who was the best fighter.

Their next day in school was completely different. Samir was a part of the 'gang' and since Shweta was at a loose end, she went to the library and asked permission to look around. The librarian was eager to encourage students to read and soon she was in deep

conversation with Shweta, asking her where she was from and what she liked to read. She suggested that since she was new to Rajasthan, she should borrow some books on the history of the state and Shweta took her advice. When the bell rang at the end of the recess, Shweta felt that she had made her first friend in town.

COUNTING BLESSINGS

When they had first come to Suratgarh, their father had been very anxious for them to be happy, and every week, he'd ask, "So, are you still homesick for Bombay?" unfailingly, they'd chorus, "yes," thinking of their school friends, their bus mates, the ice-cream parlour at the corner and the other things they could not get in Suratgarh. Soon their father stopped asking that question, knowing that the answer would remain the same. "How soon do we go back?" was all that seemed to be on the children's minds.

But slowly, without realising it, they were fitting in and enjoying themselves. The evenings were now so full. It seemed that Arjun had almost become another member of their household. One afternoon, he'd come in to ask them what the homework was and from then on, it was part of the routine for the three of them to complete their work together.

Soon Shweta became busy collecting all the articles she could find on the solar eclipse that would occur in October. Jaideep Puri heard her exulting. "Oh Sam, think of it. The eclipse will be almost total here. We could never have hoped for this in Bombay!"

"Eclipse - eclipse!" scoffed Samir. "You sound like a Science teacher!"

"May be I will become a Science teacher and

educate your children, since no one will ever succeed in educating you!" Shweta replied unkindly. She showed him the pin hole camera she had made, using a large cardboard carton. "Just put it over your head with your back to the sun and you'll be able to watch the entire eclipse on the 'screen' in front of you!"

"Who wants to do that? I'll look directly at the sun."

"And damage your eyes?"

"I'm going to get some X-rays from Arjun. I'll look through those."

Shweta's excitement finally filtered down to the boys and they too could barely wait for the 24th of October.

Early in the morning, their father woke them up. "Come on. Get up and get dressed. We're going on a journey."

"Papa, we can't," wailed Shweta. "Today is the eclipse. We're all set to watch it. We can't travel anywhere."

"Don't you trust your father, Sweaty?" Jaideep Puri asked. "Hurry up. Take all your notes, the pin hole camera, get Arjun and come on."

When everything and everyone was in the van, they set off. It was not yet light and the morning was cool. After the long months of desert heat, they savoured the chill. "Do you think winter has set in?" asked Shweta.

"This is nothing!" laughed Arjun. "Wait for January, when you sometimes don't see the sun for days on end."

"A permanent solar eclipse," joked Samir. "Then why don't we wait for that instead of getting so excited now?"

With all the chatter in the van, an hour and a half

flew past and soon they were at a small place called Lunkaransar. "Strange that all these places have 'Sar' attached to their names," commented Samir.

"Starting from home," said Jaideep Puri with a straight face, "there's Rajyesar, Arjunsar, Malkesar, Lunkaransar, Jamsar, Howdoyoudosar, then Bikaner."

For a moment there was dead silence, then the children burst out laughing and could not stop. "Papa, that's great! How-do-you-do-sir!" gasped Samir.

"I hope you know that all these places are named after rulers of the Bikaner state," said Shweta, after she regained her breath. "There was a Raj Singh and a Surat Singh, and Lunkaran—which incidentally, means Son of the race—was the son of the founder of Bikaner, Rao Bika. Do you know how Bikaner was established?"

She took a deep breath and before the boys could stop her, she carried on. "Bika was the second son of Rao Jodha, the ruler of Jodhpur, and he had fourteen brothers. One day, he arrived late for a durbar and sat whispering with his uncle to whom he was particularly close. The Raja asked if they were plotting together for conquest. Rao Bika and his uncle took this as a challenge and left Jodhpur to find their fortune. Within little over twenty years, the foundation of Bikaner was laid, and Rao Bika gave up his right to the throne of Jodhpur in the event of his elder brother dying before him."

Against their will, the boys were drawn into the story, and Arjun asked, "So, did his brother die before him?"

"Yes. Rao Bika had said that he was willing to give up the throne, but he wanted the family heirlooms and the insignia of royalty which had been





brought from Kanauj. When his father died, his younger brother refused to give them to him, so he marched against Jodhpur. Luckily, with the intervention of his mother, he got what he had demanded without a fight, and he rode back to Bikaner in triumph. One of the royal possessions was a white steed and so, until very recently, a white horse was always kept in the royal stables. Think of it! Doesn't it all sound so romantic?"

"It also sounds like a History lesson, and there's no time for that," said Jaideep Puri, herding them into the compound of the rest house. "It's getting dark and the weather is changing."

Shweta shivered. "No wonder in the olden days people used to be frightened of eclipses! Just see how eerie everything is looking."

On the wall opposite them, the sun was throwing its image through the leaves of a tree. There seemed to be a hundred little circles with a bite taken out from each.

Shweta gazed at the wall in amazement. "Why did I bother with this pin hole camera?" she asked herself aloud, after looking at the image of the sun inside the carton and on the wall in front of her. "It's the very same thing!"

"How were you to know," soothed Rekha Puri. "You've never been through a total eclipse before. The last time there was one in 1980, you were not even born, and anyway, where we were, we could not see it."

"Oh, aren't we lucky Ma?" gushed Shweta, as the drama continued to unfold before them. "If we had not been here with papa, we would never have got to see this once-in-a-lifetime sight!"

Jaideep Puri smiled to himself. He knew what the answer would be if he asked his children just now whether they were still homesick for Bombay!



ALMOST TOO MANY TO COUNT

The twins got their first taste of a desert winter. Early in the morning, they wore two layers of everything. Then, as the day progressed, the layers started peeling off, one by one, until only a single pullover was left. At 5.30 in the evening, the cold descended again and they began to bundle themselves up once more—but only on days when they had nothing to do but think of the cold.

Over the weekends, their father took them fishing and bird watching to the dozens of lakes nearby. Shweta, the systematic one, began to keep a diary of the different birds they saw.

"Look at this," she said to Samir and Arjun at the end of one of their outings. She showed them her note book, in which she'd neatly written the names of all the birds and the dates on which she'd spotted them. Now she read aloud, "coots, shoveller, pochard, pintail, pelican, ibis, heron, avocet, cormorant, flamingoes, barhead goose, painted stork... Those are from our visits to the lakes. And in the Colony itself, We've seen starlings, parrots, kingfishers, blue jays, bul buls, white wagtails, doves, hoopoes, lapwings, partridges, small green bee-eater and owls."

"Of all the birds we've seen, I liked that huge eagle which we disturbed near its nest, remember?" declared Samir. "Do you think it would have attacked us if we'd found the nest?"

"Definitely. According to my book, it seems to have been a Brahminy Kite. See, it says here that they are usually found singly, near jheels and rivers."

"Whatever it was, I got the fright of my life when it rose up from the bushes as I climbed the dune. It was so close that it looked gigantic."

"Well, I like the painted storks best. They are so regal. And they really look like they've been painted."

"What about the dead owl we found on our way to school?" asked Arjun.

"Poor thing," Shweta shuddered. "There was no blood on it, so it may have got electrocuted on one of the wires and died. Papa told me that it was the Indian Great Horned Owl. You can recognise it from the feathers on its legs. It probably stayed near our colony because of the number of rats it could get to eat."

After several visits to the lakes, the children were in need of a change of scene. Their father took them to Bikaner.

They stayed for two days and had a whirlwind tour of the Junagadh fort and the Lallgarh Palace, the Museum, the colourful market and then, they went on to the Deshnok temple. There were hundreds of rats swarming all over and Shweta was loathe to enter.

"Come on," whispered her father. "If you see a white rat, it is a sign of good fortune."

"Any rat which sees you will turn White," muttered Samir, "Your good fortune is assured."

Once she'd taken her first steps, the excitement got through to her and she scanned the animals desperately. "There's one!" she pointed and everyone turned to look. There was a flash of white and Samir said, "Didn't I tell you? All it needed was one good look at you!"

On their return trip, they stopped at Rangmahal,

just outside Suratgarh. "This is a village of snake charm-ers," Jaideep Puri told them; but as they drove through, they saw no interesting baskets and no snakes. They came to a cordoned off area.

"What is that?" asked Samir.

"An archaeological site," replied his father.

"You mean like an ancient town or something?" inquired Shweta.

"Yes. I don't know how old it is supposed to be, but may be the villagers will tell us."

"Papa, I know how old it is! There were some things from Suratgarh and Rangmahal in the museum at Bikaner. They were of the 4th century A.D., so that makes this 1600 years old!"

Samir picked up a broken pot and looked at it. "You're nuts," he said. "Nothing here looks more than ten years old. This is probably the dumping ground of the local potter!"

Shweta ignored him and went up and down each mound, picking up pieces of pottery and studying them. Samir caught up with her. "Sixteen hundred years ago, there was iron and bronze and so many other metals. Why isn't some of that here?"

"Obviously because it has been removed and taken to museums. Archaeologists are not going to leave valuable stuff here for anyone to pick up."

"Oh Papa, can we go to Kalibangan?" cried Shweta excitedly. "We learnt about Kalibangan in the sixth standard! It is one of the sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation."

The following weekend, they drove to Kalibangan. They reached the museum first and their mother forced them to read about the site.

Samir would rather have raced from showcase to

showcase, and would have left the museum with images of ancient toys and pots and never a clue as to how old they were and how wonderful. Imprisoned at his mother's side, he went past all the exhibits slowly, reading about each one, looking at the photographs in awe and expecting to see a well-ordered town as soon as he got out of the museum building.

"Where is it? Where is the town? Do you think it has a Great Bath like the one at Mohenjodaro?" he asked as they approached a couple of mounds behind the museum building. They were not dunes, and from a distance, they looked stony and hard.

"I think this is it," said Jaideep Puri.

He followed a rough track between the mounds and stopped in front of a blue board. The children were bewildered. They read the usual notice that they had seen at other national monuments.

"But where is it? Where is the town?" repeated Samir.

"This is not the place shown in the photographs Papa," said Shweta with conviction. "You saw the photographs. That looked like a real town."

"Yes," added Samir. "This is just a wilderness."

An elderly man walked up to them and Jaideep Puri started talking to him.

"Come on kids," he called. "he'll show you everything."

The children wandered back to where the adults stood, disappointed that they could not see houses and courtyards and walls and streets.

The guide took them back the way they had come and then turned towards the right. He stopped dramatically after a few paces.

"This was the Main street," he said.

The twins looked around doubtfully. Well, it was fairly broad, but that could be because so many modern-day vehicles had moved along it.

The guide saw the expressions on their faces, and he went ahead. He came to a dead end. He stretched his hands and pointed in both directions. "See, can you



see the walls of the houses now?"

At last, the children felt a thrill run through them. They stood there and looked at the bricks of the walls of the houses opening out onto the street, it finally felt very real to them. "Now it looks like what it was," cried Samir scrambling up to the top of the mound and skidding a bit on the bits of clay and the stones lying on the ground.

"What is this?" asked Shweta, picking up a curved bit of terracotta and showing it to the guide.

"A broken bangle," he said. He picked up another piece and handed it to Samir. "You must have seen such



pieces in the museum. These are all that were discarded and left behind."

"You mean this is 4500 years old?" exclaimed Shweta in awe.

The guide nodded. "After each rain, you can find a lot of bits and pieces. Sometimes you find near-perfect pieces."

His words had the effect of unleashing the combined energies of the twins. They left the guide to lecture to their parents and they raced around the mound, picking up all kinds of shards of pottery in the hope of being the ones to find the 'perfect' piece.

They found themselves standing on the edge of a deep square pit. "The Bath! The Bath!" cried Samir excitedly. The guide smiled and explained that the pit was actually the main road. Instead of excavating and opening up the entire stretch of road, only a portion had been dug up for study.

He picked up a few pebbles and threw them at the opposite wall of the pit to indicate three different levels. "Those are the marks of the floods," he said. "On three different occasions, the town got flooded and each time it was rebuilt."

"But how did it get flooded? Where did the water come from?" questioned Samir.

"The ancient Saraswati flowed here," replied the guide.

"What is now the dry bed of the Ghaggar is what he means," said Jaideep Puri. "After all the town had to be on the banks of a river. It was a river valley civilisation."

They crossed an open space that the guide explained was the dividing line between the lower city and the upper city; He took them to one of the walls

and said "Feel." His hand was in a drain that opened out into the street. It looked like a regular modern pipe and the children were awestruck.

The guide moved a little distance away and said, "Here is the well," pointing downward.

"What do you mean?" asked Samir going to him and looking around. "Are we standing on the well? What happened to the well that they have shown in the photographs?"

"It was refilled and covered to protect it," said the guide, "but this is the place where it is located and you can see the brick-lined drain going away from it."

"Are all these bricks 4000 years old? They don't look like that. I feel that they could have been made at the brick kilns down the road and transported here."

"You are right in a way," said the guide. "All the bricks are not old. A few new ones have been used to support the old structures at places."

The children ran off to look for treasures. Shweta as usual, was not satisfied with merely digging out the shards and stone. She wanted to make a discovery of her own.

"Like what?" asked Samir, as he grubbed about in the mud, pretending to be an archaeologist.

"Oh, wouldn't it be grand if we found another lost town like this? Think of it..." She sat down with her lap full of bits and pieces of terracotta and dreamed aloud. "May be we'd find the key to the Indus Valley script or something as wonderful..."

THE TRIO EXPANDS

Arjun was on top of the world. "My cousins are coming to spend a week with me," he announced, as the final exams ended in March and the three of them were worried that they would have nothing to do when the weather was so perfect. Not too hot and not too cold.

"How old are they?" asked Samir.

"Well, Rohan is about 17 I think, and Aditya is 14 or 15."

"Oh," said Samir, sounding disappointed, thinking that the cousins would not want to get involved in the company of Shweta and himself.

"Don't look like that," cried Arjun. "My cousins don't behave like big guys. They always take me out with them and I really enjoy myself. They are the sporty types you know - hikes and football and baseball and stuff like that. And because they're grown up, Ma won't mind my going out with them, even overnight. They're really great to be with."

When Rohan and Aditya arrived the following week, Samir found that Arjun had not exaggerated. They filled the house with their laughter and their tales of life in Delhi.

"When do we see the proper desert?" asked Aditya, not impressed with the amount of sand he'd seen so far.

"To get the feel of it we have to go camping, you

know that," said Rohan. "Like to come along Arjun?"

"Of course! I've been waiting for both of you to come so that we could do just that. But..." he hesitated.

"But what?"

"My friend and his sister would like to come along."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go and call them so that we can discuss it."

Arjun dashed out of the house and ran to get his friends over.

"Hold on, hold on," said Samir, calming him down. "We have to ask Ma and Pa you know."

The parental nod took some time in coming because the adult Puris had to consult with the adult Mehtas to make sure that the children would be safe. Jaideep Puri was very sceptical. "The desert is very deceptive. Every dune looks just like the other and you can keep going in circles for days on end."

"But this part of the desert is not deserted Papa. You said so yourself. There are so many villages around. We'll stick to the villages."

Once it was known that Rohan and Aditya were seasoned trekkers and scouts and had a compass, restrictions were lifted and the jubilant twins went to do their planning at Aditya's flat. They had just one day to get their equipment ready. Sleeping bags, a few tins of food, cake and biscuits. "We'll buy bread and chapattis on the way," said Rohan. "We'll get water en route since we'll be passing by the villages. But don't forget, carry your water bottles, each of you."

When the knapsacks were ready and each child lifted theirs onto their backs, they groaned. "Can't we leave some stuff behind? I don't really need another pair of jeans," decided Samir.



"And I don't want a pullover for the night. I'm sure the sleeping bag will keep me warm enough," said Shweta.

"Take it kid," advised Rohan. "It's not cold inside the house, but everyone knows what desert nights are like. And this is only March."

Shweta took a couple of rounds of the room with that load on her back.

"Carry it easily—loosely, and get your stride right, then you'll be okay," advised Rohan, who had taken a liking to Shweta because she seemed so mature for her age. "Trust us. You need everything you've put in."

It was agreed that they would be picked up on the Bikaner road four days later, since Jaideep Puri was travelling back from his camp at that time.

Be there at 9.30 sharp," instructed the twin's father. "And have fun!"

STRIKING OUT

They didn't have to be told to have fun. This was the greatest adventure in the twins's lives so far. Even Arjun, who had been around the country much more than Samir and Shweta had never been allowed to go camping before with his cousins.

"No plans, remember," said Aditya. The only certainty is that we have to meet your Dad on time. The rest is fluid. We go where our instincts take us."

No one disputed his statement, excited as they were





at the start of the trip. But after an hour's bus ride, two hours in a camel cart into the interior and some walking in the vague direction indicated by the cart-driver, the younger ones were tired and hungry and longing to stop and eat. They had started out early in the morning, when it was cool, but now it was warm despite it not being a sunny day, and each step seemed an effort.

"Come on kids," called Rohan from some distance ahead. "The cart-driver said we'd come to a lake after a couple of dunes. Let's go over this one and then rest."

He started up the gentle slope and then gave a start and jumped back. "What is it?" asked Aditya, rushing up to him.

"It looks like a baby alligator, but I guess it is some kind of desert lizard," said Rohan, a bit shakily. "I didn't expect anything to rush out from the bushes like that."

The twins panted up. "Did we miss something?"

"Yeah. A huge lizard," replied Rohan. He spread his hands to indicate its size. "I've never seen anything like it. It darted across and went over the dune."

"Oh, it must be a monitor lizard," Samir said matter-of-factly. "We see them quite often in the Colony."

"In the Colony where you stay?" asked Aditya, incredulously.

"Yes. We were terrified at first, but now we know that they won't harm us. They just move away when they are disturbed."

Arjun came up. "We oughtn't to walk so close to the bushes," he advised. "That's where the snakes hide during the day time, to avoid the heat."

"But there are so many bushes around that it is hard to keep zig-zagging," grumbled Aditya.

"Yes," added Rohan. "There is plenty of sand and the dunes are high; but the barrenness is missing. From a distance, you can see so many patches of green that it doesn't look like a proper desert."

"But it certainly feels like one," said Arjun, mopping his forehead. "I'm not taking a step further," he declared. "I am going to sit right here."

They were on the top of a dune and still, there was no lake in sight. "One more dune" pleaded Rohan. "It is higher than this one, so when we reach the top we'll be able to get a better view."

Arjun groaned and was about to protest when the decision was taken out of the children's hands. A breeze seemed to come out of nowhere, and the sand started swirling around them. "Dust storm!" shouted Samir,

sitting down beside Arjun.

"Oh, what's a little dust?..." began Aditya, when he looked to his left and cried, "Oh, oh... a LOT of dust!"

"A proper sand storm," mumbled Shweta, trying to keep the sand out of her mouth and talk at the same time.

The children had seen plenty of sand storms and had often been caught in them on the way home from school, but a sand storm in the middle of the desert, far away from buildings and trees was something quite different from that they had witnessed so far. They closed their eyes and huddled together, unable to comment on the force of the wind or the amount of dust because each time they tried, their mouths were full of grit. They just had to wait it out.

What seemed like hours later, it was still again, and the children rose and plodded on silently. It seemed that the storm had cleared the sky, for in a short time, they saw the lake ahead of them and a village nestling near its shore.

As they walked down to the houses there, Arjun said, "Isn't it wonderful how little has changed in 4000 Years? The houses are still built in the same way with mud walls, a courtyard, everything is like the description of the houses at Kalibangan."

"Yes. But in those days, the water supply and the drainage was better than it is now in villages of this size," reflected Shweta.

"What do you mean?" asked Aditya. "Are you trying to say that there has been no progress in 4000 years?"

"No, I'm not saying that. In those days, water was more plentiful, so the arrangements for it to reach the houses was more sophisticated. And also its removal. Didn't the guide show us those huge urns that collected

the water from each house and allowed it to flow into the city's drains?"

"But those drains must have smelt the same as the ones these days. It's just that we don't know about it," commented Rohan, wrinkling his nose in distaste as they passed a particularly smelly patch of water on their way to a tea stall in the village.

They sat down for a drink, then asked if they could have some bread. Soon they were talking to the owner of the stall and his son and were getting advice for the rest of their hike.

"Are we going to spend our first night near a village?" asked Samir hesitantly, when they had eaten and moved out southwards towards the next lake.

"No way!" replied Rohan. "We sleep out in the open, under the stars. The way those Rajput warriors did hundreds of years ago. You may not get a chance to do anything like it again for years. How lucky you kids are to be in a place like Suratgarh!"

Shweta laughed. "We knew. We didn't think so when we first came here but now we do."

The evening wore on and the children's pace slowed. As soon as they sighted the lake, they made preparations for their first night outdoors.

Samir and Arjun wanted to sleep on top of a dune where the breeze would play over them and keep them cool.

"You'll feel cold after some time and if there's another sand storm, you'll be in the thick of it," said Rohan. "It's better to camp at the bottom of a dune. It'll be warmer and better protected."

"Do we need a fire?" asked Shweta, suddenly unsure whether they needed further protection from wild animals and snakes.

"We can't have a fire without firewood," laughed Rohan. Don't be scared. Nothing is going to attack us here. Just roll yourself in your sleeping bag and have pleasant dreams."

The younger three did not need any further instructions. They were so exhausted after their long day that they could barely keep their eyes open long enough to admire the stars. Soon the silence was total and they did not even hear the odd owl as it swooped down searching for prey in the sand.

A SURPRISE IN THE SAND

Shweta opened her eyes at the first light and found that she was the last to awaken. The others were already stirring, Samir as usual, was digging into his bag for something to eat. Arjun was digging in the sand with his pen knife. Rohan and Aditya were walking towards the water for a wash.

"What are you digging for?" asked Shweta, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Water!" said Arjun.

"Water!" she exclaimed. "Why don't you go and get some water from the lake?"

"I'm trying out a theory of mine," explained Arjun. "If I dig deep enough, may be I'll get fresh, clean water right here. The water table must be quite high here."

Already, he had made a hole of two feet deep. The sand he was throwing out was still dry. Shweta laughed and got up. "Keep trying. I'll drink some water from my bottle and maybe by midnight, we'll get a refill from your source."

Arjun ignored her and carried on. Soon he thought the sand looked damp and he cried. "I'm right. See, it is not so dry any more."

Samir knelt down beside him and started to dig as well. Suddenly he shouted "Ouch!"

"What happened?" cried Shweta, rushing to his aid. "Did something bite you?"

"No, my nail hit something hard," he said, shaking his hand and looking at it for signs of injury.

"Must be a stone," said Arjun. "I'll take it out with my knife." He moved to the side of the small pit and began to dig in earnest. There was a resounding clang and Shweta gasped. "That doesn't sound like a stone. More like metal."

Arjun cried. "It is metal. I can see something blackish—like a trunk."

"Wow!" yelled Samir. "Maybe it's a treasure chest. Here, let me dig it out.. We can get it out before your cousins return and surprise them." He slid halfway into the pit they had created and started scrabbling around excitedly, causing Arjun to push him away angrily.

"You're making more sand fall in and cover it. Just stay calm and stay out."

Cautiously, he started scraping away at the object in the sand. "To your left," he instructed. "Dig up some of the sand from that side. It is stuck there and only a part of it is sticking out here."

Shweta watched, as the two boys took out handfuls of sand. "It seems to be round," commented Samir.

"May be it's a metal bucket," suggested Shweta. "Maybe someone came to the lake and threw away their bucket because it was broken."

Arjun stopped work at once. "You're right. How silly to get worked up over a bucket." Samir carried on digging alone. He pulled and tugged and suddenly, with one last, massive heave, he got the object free and came flying back and landed scrawling in the sand. "Wow!" he exclaimed, staring at what he held in his hands.

"Looks like an overgrown frisbee," commented Aditya, coming up to them.

Shweta took it from Samir's hand and turned it

over, looking at the metal clasps at the back of it. "A shield," she whispered in awe. She got up and walked around. "You know, a fallen shield means a battle ground. Maybe this place was the site of some old battle. Maybe, if we dig some more, we'll uncover a page from history."

"Yeah—dead bodies and armour," cried Samir ghoulishly. "Let's start."





"Don't be crazy," laughed Rohan. "How can you dig with your bare hands? Just be content with what you've found and let's go on our way."

"Hey Shweta, you're the Know-All," cried Samir. "Which battles were fought in this area. Whose shield could it be?"

Shweta thought hard. "All this land came under the Maharaja of Bikaner. Battles were fought on it with the Mughals and with local Rajput chiefs as well. Who can say to which of them this shield belonged?"

"May be this crest will give us a clue," suggested Arjun. "If we knew who the crest belonged to, we could solve the mystery."

Rohan pulled out a packet of food and started sharing it out among them. "Come on. We have to carry on with our trek. We have just three nights left and we want to cover as much of this area as we can."

"Why?" groaned Arjun. "Why do we need to see more of it? One dune is very much like the other and so are the lakes!"

"Think of it!" pleaded Samir. "Another site like this will not be easy to find!"

Shweta looked up at the older boys. "He's right. We have already found one super relic of the past. It could be two or three hundred years old. Why not search some more? What we discover may make a difference to our perception of the history of our country."

"There is no village nearby," murmured Rohan. "We'll need well water and food. We don't have very much with us. I'll give you a couple of hours, but after lunch, we'll have to leave."

"Yeah!" cried the three younger ones, and gulped down their food, eager to start digging afresh.

Shweta was now the most energetic of the lot and

she concentrated fiercely on the dune on which the shield had been found. For hours, the children dug and scraped, but found nothing.

"I'm having second thoughts about this archaeology business," panted Shweta. "Maybe it is not all that good an idea to become an archeologist."

"Not if you have to spend your life digging uselessly like this," agreed Arjun.

Samir was still hopeful. "But I unearthed something! How exciting that was!"

Willy nilly, the two older boys had also got caught up in the enthusiasm of the group and they too quietly walked around, poking at the ground and looking for signs of buried treasure. There was none.

A tired and disappointed quintet regrouped at lunch time, exchanging views on why they had not found anything more in the sand. "It could not have been a battlefield," decided Shweta. "Or else we'd have found something more: armour, weapons, even bones of men and animals. No. That shield was probably dropped by someone when passing in a hurry."

"Do you mean to say that it is worthless?" asked Samir angrily.

"It is old, so it could not be worthless, but it tells us nothing - if you know what I mean," replied Shweta.

The others could only agree. The morning had had its high and its low and now it was time to move on.

HOME AGAIN

The rest of the trek was an assortment of experiences for the children. They swapped tales of school, sang songs and played Antakshari and enjoyed a feeling of camaraderie quite rare, considering the differences in their ages. They saw dunes, villages, a solitary desert fox rushing off as they approached, a herd of black buck that was so unafraid that they allowed the children to come almost within touching distance of them. Then they turned and loped off, leaving the children entranced by the grace of their flight.

"How gorgeous they look!" breathed Samir in awe. "We could never experience anything like this in a zoo."

They topped one more dune and saw the road snaking along below them. "Are we on time Rohan?" asked Shweta. "Do you think Papa has already passed this way?"

"He said after 9.30 and it's not even 8. He'll only just have left Bikaner. Come on. We can carry on walking on the dunes as long as we remain in sight of the road."

Arjun gave a little groan. "Uh - why don't we sit somewhere and wait?"

"We'll stop at that village up ahead," suggested Rohan.

It was Malkisar. They descended from the dunes, sat on the culvert and ate the last of their snacks.

"There!" cried Shweta. "There comes a jonga! Maybe it's Papa!"

But it wasn't. Any number of military vehicles passed, some of them in convoys, until finally, one ground to a halt near them and Jaideep Puri got out.

"Safe and happy, I see," he commented as the twins rushed to him and began to pour out the story of their expedition. Samir, Arjun and Shweta spoke all at one



time, and Samir almost caused an accident by waving the shield in the small space at the back of the vehicle. Jaideep Puri covered his ears with his hands and snapped. "Quiet. Not another word until we reach home!" His authoritative tone silenced the children and there was peace until they neared their house.

"Ma, Ma, look what I excavated!" yelled Samir, "A warrior's shield!" He talked on excited, but Shweta was silent.

"Didn't you enjoy yourself?" asked her mother.

"Yes, but I was hoping that we'd discover a lost city or evidence of some kingdom no one knew existed!"

"Come on Sweaty, this is enough of a find for me—and you can share in it," Samir said generously.

"There's no question of yours and mine," stated Rekha Puri flatly. "That shield will be shown to an expert when we get back to Bombay. You may have to give it up to the Museum."

Samir frowned "Why? It's only a shield. It has no value for anyone else - but it's a big thrill for me because I dug it out."

"It may not be anything special son," said his mother, "and in that case, they'll let you keep it. But if it's valuable..."

"I don't want to know soon," groaned Samir. "I'll feel miserable if it's valuable and it is taken away." He paused. "And I'll feel miserable if it is not valuable and I'm laughed at for digging it out of the sand! So let's not go back to Bombay, okay? Let's just stay on here and keep it with us happily."

Mrs Puri suppressed a smile. Was this the same boy who, just six short months ago, had said he never wanted to stay anywhere but in Mumbai?

THE SAND NEVER FAILS TO THRILL

School had restarted for Arjun, but the twins did not join because they had completed Class 8 and would go back to their old school in Mumbai, where the academic year started in June. Their return tickets had been bought, but instead of jubilation, there was a lot of grumbling in the house.

"What's the matter with you kids?" asked Rekha Puri testily. "Don't you want to go back to your old school and your friends and all the activities you were so happy with all these years?"

"We want to go back to all that, but we want to stay here as well," declared Samir, as though it was a perfectly logical statement to make.

That evening, to get the smile back on the children's faces, Jaideep Puri drove them to the dune. "Ma and I will go to town to look at some Rajasthani bedspreads," he said. "We'll pick you up on our way back."

It was still warm when the children started climbing the dune. The boys had a football with them and Shweta had a book, but as she reached the top, the book fell from her grasp and Samir snatched it up and put it into his T-shirt. "What a stick-in-the-mud you are! Or should I say stick-in the-sand? This is our last trip to the dune and you're going to read a book! What a girl!"

"It's not a reading book," she panted in protest as she chased him to get it back. "It's a writing book. I

want to record my impressions of the dune."

"I knew it!" cried Samir. "She doesn't have that piece of brain equipment called memory. I told you she was lacking in some way didn't I?"

Arjun, to whom these words were addressed, laughed and dropped the football. Shweta made off with it and kicked it across to the top of the next dune. "I'll show you who's lacking in what!" she snarled, racing off to retrieve the ball before the boys could. Soon the three of them were in fierce competition, each one for himself-herself and three goal posts in different parts of the dune.

Shweta tripped and fell and groaned. "All the soft sand has got blown off the top in the past few months of storms!"





"It's easier to run here now," agreed Samir.

"...and harder when you fall," she went on.

Suddenly she sat up. "Hey, I don't remember seeing all those bits of bricks up here before. See, this part is hard and looks like it is the courtyard of a house."

The boys came closer and started at the place where she had fallen. "A courtyard on top of dune?" Samir asked doubtfully. "Wouldn't a terrace be more likely?"

"Look," Shweta cried, suddenly feeling a surge of excitement, "there are broken pots around, just like in Kalibangan." She picked up a piece of terracotta which lay next to her and exclaimed. "I can't be mistaken. Just look at this! It is as thick and solid as the pottery of Kaligangan."

"Kalibangan has a lot of delicate stuff as well," pointed out Samir.

"I know—but this has the same old feel to it."

Arjun was suddenly practical. "Let's not get excited. Maybe this is not so old. Or may be someone went to Kalibangan and picked up a few broken bits of pottery and then threw them here."

"You have a point there," agreed Shweta. "Let's look around and see if we find anything more, or whether these are the only bits."

The three of them started walking around the dune with their eyes down, fanning out within a radius of a hundred metres of the first shard of terracotta found by Shweta.

Suddenly Shweta gave a scream. The boys ran back to her, wondering what had happened.

WILL THE MYSTERY REMAIN?

"A toy! A toy!" Shweta continued to kneel where she was and the boys dropped all the bits and pieces they had collected, and sat down beside her. They touched the small bit of clay she held reverently in the palm of her hand. It was not just a shard like the many they had just picked up. There was no doubt about this one. It was an animal with a part of one foot and the front of



its face missing. It could be a cow or a dog or even an elephant, but it was not the typical Indus Valley bull that was shown in the history books.

You've just been proved wrong Arjun," said Shweta. "No one in their right senses would throw out a toy if they found it elsewhere. And why would they carry it all the way up the dune before throwing it out? No. No. There is something under this very dune!"

She looked at the bits of pottery that the boys had collected. "So many?" she asked, amazed in spite of her belief that she had found another Harappan site.

"They are lying all around," declared Samir.

"I'm surprised that we didn't notice them on all our other visits," added Arjun.

"Clot! They were not there. The sandstorm have uncovered them now." She examined the shards commenting on each one. "See the way it is made. The clay is different from the pots of today. This is so hard and so - so - different. Oh guys, do you think we are standing right now on another town of the Indus Valley Civilisation?"

The boys did not reply and Shweta went on, almost to herself. "After all, if you look at the map, there could very easily be a couple of more cities between Kalibangan and Banawali in Haryana. And the overflow of the Ghaggar comes here in the monsoons, so in those days, this place must have been on the banks of the river. Think of it logically. How did this dune become so high? There must have been some obstruction which caused the sand to start piling up. The more I think of it - the more logical it seems. What's more, although we think of this as only one dune, there are a whole series of them and they cover an area that could easily have been an ancient city."

The boys were silent. They had no arguments to offer, because Shweta's explanations sounded so sensible. Samir was the first to say something. "What about those guys at the bottom of the dune, who are taking cartloads of sand to feed the brick kilns across the road? Won't they have found something by now? Should we ask them?"

"Won't they also damage something?" added Arjun as an afterthought.

"Let's go and see," said Shweta.

Holding the toy tightly in her fist, she ran over the dune until she came to the steep edge. Then, she lay down like the boys and quickly rolled down, shaking the sand out of her clothes when she reached the bottom.

They went towards one of the inlets in the dune, created by the steady removal of sand. There was no camel cart there now and no one they could question, but the children examined the sides of the dune, scraping away at it with the odd stick they'd picked up. They wanted to see if there was anything hard behind the sand that could be the walls of ancient buildings or an ancient town. There was nothing.

Suddenly, the persistent blowing of a horn carried to children's ears. "Oh no! We'll have to go now!" They turned with sullen faces - only to see two sets of laughing parents clamber out of their cars with an icebox and a hamper.

"Surprise kids! Let's have a moonlight picnic!"

"Yippee!" screamed the boys and Shweta, more intent on the additional time they would get on the dune, than the prospect of the goodies their parents had brought.

"But you have to pay for the treat," warned Jaideep

Puri. Lug up some of this stuff or else you don't get to eat and drink."

The boys threw down their sticks and raced to help, but Shweta held back, still peering at the dune and wishing that she had X-ray eyes to see what lay beneath it.

"Oh Ma - Pa- look what I found. There could be an entire city below this dune. Oh Pa, let's try and dig up the dune and see what's below! We can if we come here daily until we leave."

Jaideep Puri admired the toy she showed him, then burst the balloon of hope Shweta had created in her mind. "Do you know how many years an excavation takes? And how many surveys by experts are needed? It is not child's play. Let's just go up now and look around and have fun and forget about digging up the dune until you grow up. Maybe you'll become an archaeologist and you'll really find a lost city here. That's something wonderful to look forward to and work for."

"But Papa, that will take years and years. By then, someone else would have found it!"

Rekha Puri panted up to them. Samir went back half-way down the dune to give his mother a helping hand. He looked at Shweta's crestfallen face and said, "Hey Sweaty, don't you remember what was written about Kalibangan in the Museum? The site was identified in 1952 but excavations were done between 1961 and 1969. So there was a gap of nine years before work began. Why, in nine years time, you and I could be full-fledged archaeologists, couldn't we?"

He turned, half-hopefully, half-doubtfully to his mother for reassurance. "Kids," she said gently, sitting down on the slope to catch her breath. We don't even know if what you've found is really that old. let's go to experts when we return to Bombay and then we'll think

about it. As your father said, it is something wonderful to look forward to."

"A lost battle-field—and a lost city. What more has the sand hidden?" asked Shweta, picking up a handful and letting it run through her fingers. "How I wish I could blow it all away with one giant breath and uncover the glory of the Past."

"Think of it Sweaty," said Samir. "Our experiences here have really been way out. We may not have got all the answers, but you have so many questions and so many mysteries to solve for ourselves over the next few years. We're about the luckiest kids alive!"

"Yeah, I guess so. But you know, the saddest part is that no one will believe all these exciting things really happened," replied Shweta.

"They'll think it is fiction! Who would imagine that we could have more adventures in a remote desert town like this, than in the big metropolis we came from?"

EPILOGUE

Suratgarh
8 October 2003

Dear Sam,

You miscalculated by a couple of years. Remember when we thought that Suratgarh housed a Harappan site? You gave me hope that excavations would take nine years or more to begin, by which time you and I would be full-fledged archaeologists. Well, your timing was off (not to mention that you also took off in a different direction to join the Merchant Navy!) and the wheels we set into motion in 1996 began spinning earlier and faster than we expected.

When I arrived here last week, I found that Suratgarh had changed a lot. The town has doubled in size, that Solar Power Plant is a great success and even the old cantonment is quite classy compared to what it was when we were kids. There are two ice-cream parlours, a hair-dressing salon, a boutique, a proper supermarket and a lot more. We could have done with all that, couldn't we?

I stayed with Aunty Shobhana for a few days. She is now commanding the hospital here and Uncle is posted in Delhi. Arjun, as you know, is in his final term at the N.D.A. and will be coming here after the passing out parade in December.

I'm sure you want to hear about the excavation.

The area that was once dominated by "our" sand dune, has been cordoned off. That steep wall of sand has disappeared. No other kids will be tumbling down it like we did! But other kids who visit in the years to come will get a different kind of pleasure from our dune.

An area bigger than that of Kalibangan has been uncovered and I guess it represents the two years of work that the A.S.I has already put in. The Director of the excavation, Dr. Jaywant, has been kindness itself to me. He has taken me under his wing and whenever something unusual is discovered, he points it out to me and tries to get me to give him answers. It is challenging - and rewarding.

There are tents pitched neatly for the workers, and for collecting and classifying material found on the site. I have a tent of my own among these, and as I step out of it each morning. I see streets and houses that are over 4000 years old!

I must confess that it is not all roses and romance. The sun is killing, the work is laborious (you'd call it torture) and there are still mounds and mounds of sand to dig through and sort out. Those streets and houses I mentioned are only the beginning - there's so much more to uncover.

Earlier, I was really resentful that the shield turned out to be just an ordinary soldier's and that I'd not had enough time to grow up and become an expert and lead this excavation myself. But now I realise that Surratgarh is not that fabled lost city or the missing piece of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle. It is not the end of a search. It is a part of it - and there is so much more work to be done, so many more places to identify in this great task of uncovering and understanding our past.

I don't feel cheated anymore - only happy that I

have this great opportunity to be a part of the excavation just because years ago, two crazy boys and I were playing football on a dune and I fell a bit too hard! Do you know Sam, there is a board at the entrance to the site that says, "The existence of a city was first stumbled upon by three children in 1996, when they found shards of terracotta pottery and a toy dating back to 2500 B.C." So I guess it doesn't matter that I wasn't the one to decipher the Indus Valley script : thanks to its being deciphered, there is so much more to learn from this excavation.

I'll be here for another month. Then I have to go back home and carry on with my studies. I'll see you when you come on leave from the training ship. Maybe we'll get a chance to work together on the site.

I'll look forward to that, because, hard though it is to believe, I actually miss you and your irritating wise-cracks!

With love as usual,
Shweta.



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